

**THE CONCEPT OF PAROUSIA IN THE NEW TESTAMENT:
IT'S IMPLICATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH**

Abstract

This article is titled the concept of *parousia* in New Testament: It's Implication for 21st Century Church. The paper attempts to reconcile the tension between the imminence of the *parousia* and its delay in New Testament. This writer discovers that it is improbable that Jesus ever taught or suggested that his return would definitely and necessarily happen soon. Rather Jesus, like Paul, may have considered these events as possibly imminent, but the timing was uncertain since it was unknown. The fact remains that both Paul and Jesus, like some of their Jewish and Christian contemporaries who wrote on eschatological matters, were capable of combining the language of possible imminence with a discussion of events that must transpire before the end comes. If at most Jesus or Paul spoke of imminence of the final intervention of God or his agent in human history, then it is not appropriate to speak of Paul or for that matter of Jesus as attempting to cope with the problem of the delay of the *parousia*.

The methodology used is historical-critical and grammatical method with contextual hermeneutic that makes the text relevant to the people in focus, that is the church in Africa. The significance of the New Testament concept is that the tension between the non-fulfillment and fulfillment; between this world and the world to come, between hope and possession, between concealment and manifestations; between faith and sight should be resolved, and that the decisive contribution toward this has already been made in Christ. The paper concludes that the overall impression and intention of Paul and Jesus is clear, they leave the reader in a situation where he cannot date the time of the end, he cannot say when the *parousia* will take place. The key note is watchfulness. Watch therefore, for you neither know the day nor the hour. The paper recommended that the 21st century church in Africa should not belabor themselves on the issue of *parousia* rather they should go about witnessing the gospel of Jesus to the people who have not heard about him.

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of the *parousia* that is the second coming of Jesus into the world has been and will continue to be a subject of serious debate among scholars. C. P. Ceroke notes that the reason why the debate continues to rage on is due to the fact that both Jesus Christ and Paul presented the subject as if it was proximate. Though the word *parousia* is not an Old Testament term, it is a Greek word that was brought into primitive Christianity by Apostle Paul to describe the OT concept of the Day of the Lord (Albrecht 861). Oepke Albrecht states that the whole thinking of Jesus was permeated by the ideas of eschatology. Akangbe submits that the heart and central focus of the New Testament is the *parousia* (*Unpublished Ph D Thesis 1989*).

1.1. ETYMOLOGICAL MEANING OF *PAROUSIA*

The word *παρουσία* occurs in the New Testament twenty-four times, four times in Matthew 24 and the others in the Epistles: eleven are in the authentic Pauline letters; occur three times in 2 Thessalonians 2, and six times in the Catholic Epistles. In the genuine Pauline letters, except in 2 Cor.10:10, it is always part of a prepositional phrase (Balz & Scheider 43). *Parousia* was derived from pagan Greek usage, of the ceremonial arrival of a King or ruler with honours or of a god to help people in need. (Malherbe 272). This is its Hellenistic usage. When Christians speak of the *parousia* of the Lord, they probably think of the pomp and circumstance attending those imperial visits as parodies of the true glory to be revealed (Bruce 57). The basic meaning of the word is to be derived from the verb *παρειμι* “be present”. Originally, *παρουσία* meant presence *παρειμι* can also take on the sense of “come, approach” e. g (Judges 19:3 LXX); *παρουσία* frequently means “arrival as the onset of presence”. It is used in legal documents in the

sense of active presence (Kittel & Friedrich 859). It has a sacral meaning in philosophy. Plato used it in the profane sense as a synonym of μεθεξις “participation.”

2. USAGE IN NEW TESTAMENT

Paul is the earliest New Testament writer to use parousia in its technical meaning; but the expectation of Christ’s eschatological coming did not originate with him. That this expectation was already part of the Aramaic speaking church before Paul is evident from Paul’s use of Maranatha (“come lord”) in I Corinthians 16:22. The synoptics show that the tradition of the coming of the Son of Man preceded Paul’s use of parousia to describe it (e. g. Mark 14: 62, Matthew 26:64, Mark 8:38, Matthew 16:27, and Luke 9:26) (Malherbe 271). In some verses in the New Testament, parousia is used to speak of the presence of apostle Paul or his fellow workers (I Cor. 16:17, 2 Corinthian 10:10, Philippians 2:12). In 2 Thessalonians 2:9 and 2 Peter 3:12, the antichrist and the day of the Lord respectively are the subjects of the coming, here, the use of parousia approaches the more specific usage. The only use of parousia language in the Gospels is confined to Matthew 29 and in each of the verses in question the use of “parousia” is surely redactional. For example, though the Q-sayings in Matthew 24:27, 37 use the term parousia, the Lukan parallels in 17:24, 26 have no reference to a parousia, but rather refer to “the Son of man in his days” and “the days of the Son of man”. There are also clear evidences in Matthew 24:3 that it is part of the redactional agenda of the first evangelist to change what is found in his source to the term parousia (Pace 153).

The New Testament does not attest to any unified conception or attitude concerning Christ’s parousia. The parousia is described more specifically in Mark 13: 24-27 parallel in Matthew 24: 29-31, Luke 21: 25-27, I Thessalonians 4:16, 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10, 2:8, Rev. 14: 14-16, 19: 11-16. The motifs treated in these texts are derived from the Old Testament and

Jewish salvation expectations which are earthly personalities such as the Messianic king. The advent of Jesus Christ from heaven (Acts 3:20f, Philippians 3:20, I Thess. 1:10, 2 Thes. 1:7) is the heart of the New Testament concept of the parousia.

Another word used to describe this concept is revelation (apokalypsis) which occurs in 2 Thess. 1:7, I Cor. 1:7, 3:13. This involves some unveiling of some heavenly truth which has until then remained hidden. A further revelation is involved in the second coming of Jesus, which has become the focus of the church's future hope (Guthrie 803). In I Timothy 6:14, 2 Timothy 4:1 and Titus 2:13 *epiphaeia* (glorious manifestation) is used to describe the *parousia* which has a more Hellenistic background (Balz and Schneider 44).

3. OLD TESTAMENT PRESUPPOSITIONS FOR THE TECHNICAL USE OF THE TERM IN NEW TESTAMENT

Old Testament presuppositions for the technical use of the term as discussed by Kittel and Friedrich are: The Coming of God in direct Self-attestation and in the Cultus; the coming of God in History; the coming of Yahweh as world king and the coming of the Messiah (559-863).

a. The coming of God in direct self-attestation is closely related to this concept in the Cultus. Places of grace are later seen to become Cult sites and vice versa. (Gen 16:13f 28:18, Jn 6:11-24, 2 Sam 24:25etc). This is vividly reflected in primitive history and the stories of the patriarchs (Gen. 4:4, 8:20, 15:1-7). Yahweh is not tied to specific modes in His self-declaration. He can appear in dreams (Genesis 20:3, 28:13); in veiled theopanies (Gen. 18:1, 32:25etc); in the cloud and in visions at the calling of the prophets, in the storm, with His hand or in his word.

The coming of Yahweh (God) means victory over the enemies of Israel (Egypt - Isaiah 19:1; Assyria - Isaiah 30:4, the nations - Habakkuk 3:3ff). For his apostate and disobedient people, His coming is terrible and His anger fearful (Amos 5:18-20, Zep. 1:15-8, Jeremiah 23:19 etc). Uppermost to all, is His appearing to bring freedom from tyranny (Ex. 3:8, Ps. 80:2) and to

conclude the covenant. The liberation of the Israelites from exile is regarded as almost an exact equivalent of the redemption out of Egypt.

Yahweh is lauded as King, whom none is like. He is called King forever and ever (Exodus 15:18). The more the concept of Yahweh's kingship is expanded, the more all existing demonstrations of it are felt to be provisional. Yahweh will be enthroned into his kingship in full power and majesty. Then the promise of salvation will be fulfilled. The prospect of the enthronement of Yahweh as king of the whole world is combined with the cosmic perspective of the creation of a new heaven and earth. All creatures will rejoice before Yahweh, there will be universal peace among men and beasts. All suffering will be overcome (Isa. 65:21). Joy, happiness and rejoicing will be witnessed all over the land and from Gentile nations, gifts will be brought as offerings to Yahweh.

The coming of the Messiah will lead to world peace. For the main function of the Messiah in the Old Testament is to execute peace (Zech. 9:9f). This coming is regarded as a coming in history, though not without eschatological impulses. For it was seen as the Day of the Lord' – Yom Yahweh. This concept of Yom Yahweh first emerged in the Old Testament with Amos in the middle of the eighth century B. C., though it draws on previous accounts of theophanies in the Old Testament. Witherington notes that "Yom Yahweh had eschatological overtones and was used to describe a definitive and final manifestation of God's redemptive judgement". He states thus:

Yom Yahweh is never used to describe days and events in the past. It is always applied to a coming imminent judgement from God, and certainly in Zephaniah, the concept has eschatological overtones. That the Yom-Yahweh is not something confined to a literal 24 hour day, but rather an event that goes on for sometime is made clear in Isaiah 34:8, where Yom parallels (Sana-Year).... The primary character of "that day" is judgement from which the righteous get protection (150).

Judaism speaks also of the coming of other Saviours more or less akin to the Messiah e. g. Abel, Enoch, Michael, Elijah, the priestly king to whom all the words of the Lord are to be revealed. His star will rise like that of a king and he will radiate light and knowledge (Kittel and Friedrich 864). It is noted that: The appearing (parousia) of the priestly king, for whom a Maccabean (John Hyrcanus) might have served as a model, but to whom eschatological expectations were transferred is “highly esteemed as a prophet of the Most high” (Kittel and Friedrich 864).

Rabbinic Judaism rejects apocalyptic and wonders when the Son of David will come. He is expected at a time of great tribulation and dereliction with the cleaning of the people from sin regarded as a precondition. His coming is awaited with fear. However, it was not a part of early Jewish expectations about a Messiah that would return to earth after his death. The idea of second coming does not appear in literature prior to the time of Jesus and Paul (Witherington 147).

4. THE MOTIFS OF IMMINENCE, DELAY, AND UNCERTAINTY OF THE PAROUSIA IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Christian doctrine is centered around the teachings of Paul in his Epistles and in the sayings of Jesus as presented in the Gospels, with special emphasis on the synoptic Gospels. Within the narratives of the Gospel, there are sayings of Jesus which have been interpreted to mean that Jesus expected the eschatological kingdom to come in the immediate future; those that also signify delay and those that portray uncertainty in fulfillment of his return. Paul’s epistles also portray similar images, Revelation and the Catholic epistles, all have passages that portray these three motifs in the parousia discourse. However, the two key personalities are Jesus and

Paul. This work is limited to the sayings of Jesus with regards to the parousia in the synoptic Gospel and that of Paul in the Epistles.

The Synoptic gospels are Matthew, Mark and Luke. The word “synoptic” literally means “a seeing together”. They are called the synoptic “gospels” because they basically cover the same material. They are different from the Gospel of John in that John contains very little found in the other Gospels (McCain 105). However, within the synoptics abound similarities, differences and omissions of certain narratives. This has given rise to the synoptic problem. One of the major problems is the source of information in writing these Gospels. Did the writers borrow from one another and, if so, who borrowed from whom? This has resulted in the question of authenticity of the Gospels being raised by scholars. It is the position of this paper that the synoptics are authentic and aligns itself with the four-document theory⁶ proposed by B. H. Streeter. With regards to the authorship, it aligns itself with McCain’s views that the book of Matthew was written by Matthew, the tax collector, with the intention of proving that to the Jews that Jesus was indeed the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament. Mark was written by Apostle John Mark, a disciple of Jesus, and addressed to the Romans with the intent of convincing them about the daily and mission of Jesus. The book of Luke was written by Luke, the beloved physician, the friend and traveling companion of Paul during part of his second and third missionary journeys; addressed to most excellent Theophilus with the intent of portraying Jesus as a universal saviour for both Gentiles and Jews (105-140).

Three sayings have been interpreted to mean that Jesus expected his return in the immediate future. In Matthew 10, when he sent out the twelve disciples on their preaching mission in Galilee, one of the instructions was “you will not finish going through all the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Matthew 10:23 NIV). Schweitzer interpreted this to mean

that Jesus expected his kingdom to come within few days before the twelve had completed their mission in Galilee. He used this verse to mean that Jesus expected the mission of the twelve to create a great movement of repentance among Israel so that the eschatological kingdom would come before they had finished their mission (Schweitzer 359).

A second saying appears in Matthew 16:28. Then Jesus said “there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power” (Mark 9:1 NIV). Matthew renders it “before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom (16:28). Luke simply puts it “before they see the kingdom” (Luke 9:27). In the Olivet discourse, there is the third saying. The three Gospels record the saying “this generation will not pass away before all these things have happened (Mark 13:30 and parallel). On the surface of it, from the literal perspectives, the last two saying portray a bold affirmation of the imminence of the parousia. The expectation was within a generation; thirty years or more, when some of the disciples would still be alive.

In the Olivet discourse, the motif of delay is also salient. Jesus had taught that troubled times would come with wars and rumours of wars and pretenders would arise claiming to be the Messiah, but the end is not yet (Mark 13:7). Infact, a necessary condition of preaching the gospels to all nations (Mark 13:10) portrays delay. The parable of the ten minas as recorded in Luke 19:11-26, reveals the delay motif. Delay is sounded in the parable of the importunate woman (Luke 18:1-8), the ten virgins. A note of delay is also heard in the saying “The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it” (Ladd 207).

The motif of uncertainty appears to be the strongest with regards to the parousia in the synoptics gospels. Jesus flatly affirmed that he did not know when the kingdom would come.

(Mk. 13:32), ‘Take heed, watch for you do not know when the time will come (Mark 13:33, Mark 13:36).

Ladd posits that Matthew adds some Q material emphasizing the indefiniteness of the time and the need to watch (209). Matthew 24:36-42 states thus:

No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a handmill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

A note of warning is seen in Matthew 24: 44: “So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him”.

The wicked servant who utilizes the opportunity provided by the Master’s delay as an occasion for mistreating his fellow servants has a surprise package awaiting him. For the master will come in an unexpected day and hour not known by the servant.

Paul’s usage of the term *parousia* signifying the coming of Christ from heaven are in three letters; and all of them early. These are I Thessalonians, where it is most prevalent (2:19, 3:13, 4:15, 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 8-9, and I Corinthians 15:28). This is so because the situations Paul was addressing in the Thessalonians correspondence and in I Corinthians required him to speak at some length on matters pertaining to the Christological future (Witherington 153). In 1 and 2 Thessalonians Paul must correct some certain misunderstandings about future eschatology, while in 1 Corinthians; Paul must correct an overrealized or overspiritualized eschatology by settling over the eschatological future. The phrase Paul most frequently used to

speak of Christ's return is the "Day of the Lord or the Day of Christ". The first reference to imminence is I Thessalonians 4: 15-17: According to Paul's own words:

We tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (NIV).

This text when read portrays Paul's imminent expectation of the parousia, within his lifetime. With regards to the tone of delay, Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 2: 3: "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction". The motif of uncertainty is revealed in I Thessalonians 5:1-3. Paul states thus:

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying "peace and safety", destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

These sayings by Jesus and Paul as reflected in the synoptic gospels and Pauline Epistles reflect conflicting views with regards to the coming of Christ. The debate has been on-going amongst scholars with various positions taken. Some view the sayings of imminence as authentic and those of delay as words put by the church into the mouths of Jesus and for Paul a change of theology due to the non-fulfillment of the *Parousia* at a time he was close to his death.

Cullman asserts that Jesus was in error in his expectation of the time of the end, but this mistake does not affect the basic structure of his teaching about the kingdom, although he was mistaken about the time of the kingdom (49). Werner Kummel categorically states that Jesus was in error on this point:

Jesus does not proclaim in quite general terms the future coming of the kingdom of God, but also its imminence. What is more He emphasized this so concretely that he limited it to the lifetime of his hearers generation It is perfectly clear that this prediction of Jesus was not realized and it is therefore impossible to assert that Jesus was not mistaken about this (quoted in Hoekema 118).

Balz and Schneider also posit that Jesus himself anticipated the imminent establishment of the kingdom of God, but the early church specifically anticipated his impending parousia on the basis of the Easter experience and the possession of the Spirit (45). Schweitzer postulates that from Matthew 10:23, Jesus realized that he had made a mistake – this was the first delay of the parousia. Now Jesus began to think that he had to bring in the kingdom by his own suffering and death. But he was mistaken even in this, and so he died an utterly disillusioned man (358). He further argues, this in turn, is believed to have forced early Christians to wrestle with the problem of the delay of the return of the Son of Man and the delay of the end of history. Due to the imminence of Jesus and Paul, a sort of interim ethics was promulgated, that is, imperatives that would directly be applicable to all believers during the short time span left before the conclusion of human history. For this reason, it is believed that late-twentieth century Christians cannot directly follow and apply these same ethical teachings of Jesus and Paul.

W. Davies followed suit in a paper delivered at the 100th meeting of the Society of Bible literature arguing that in Schweitzer classic work “the Mysticism of Paul the Apostles” he enlarged our perspectives. He stated thus: he enlarged our perspectives and delivered us from provincialism, but did also introduce into his interpretation of eschatology mechanical and even magical categories which deprive it of full’ moral sense.” (quoted in Hoekema 35).

C. H. Dodd views Paul’s sayings in his epistles to be contradictory and attributes this to the fact that Paul realized that he would not live to partake in the *parousia*. He states thus:

Paul in his first epistles to the Thessalonians; he affirmed that we (meaning not himself, but the Thessalonians believers) would meet the Lord in the air (I Thess. 4:17). In I Corinthians, written some seven years later, Paul expressed the conviction that he and at least some of his Corinthians converts would still be alive at the parousia.

He further argues that after I Corinthians, however, Paul is no longer heard with this confident expectation. In 2 Corinthians, written shortly after I Corinthians, he expressed the thought he would probably die before the parousia. Dodd states thus:

In his later epistles, the thought of the imminent return fades away. The emphasis is now on ethical exhortations and on our present participation in Christ, there is therefore a kind of transformation of eschatology into mysticism (115).

Oscar Cullman taught that, whereas in I Thessalonians 4:15, Paul had said that he would still be living when Christ returned, in later epistles (II Cor. 5:1ff and Philippians 1:23) he affirmed the parousia would occur only after his death. In discussing the development of Paul's thought, Schweitzer states rather boldly: "From his first letter to his last, Paul's thought is always dominated by the expectation of the immediate return of Jesus" (Mysticism 52). He argued using proof-texts, that Paul believed from first to last that the Lord would return immediately that is within Paul's own lifetime or soon after and that this conditioned all his thinking and ethical advice.

Wanamaker Charles highlights the fact that one important feature of Paul's eschatological understanding, at least at the time he wrote I Thessalonians becomes evident in I Thessalonian 4:15b. He believed that he and many of his contemporaries would still be alive at the time of the Lord's coming, as the phrase ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι εἰς τὴν παρουσίαν τοῦ κυρίου ("we who are living, who remain until the coming of the Lord") demonstrates.

He argues that:

For Paul would have used the indefinite third person had he not wished to include himself among those who would probably survive the parousia. He uses the somewhat emphatic first person plural construction ‘ἡμεῖς ... οὐ’ μὴ φθάσωμεν (“we ... shall certainly not “precede” or have an advantage”). That Paul believed the coming of Christ to be imminent is shown by the way in which his paraenetic instruction in I Cor. 7: 25-31 is determined by his belief that the adult generation at the time of his writing was the last generation before the end.

Bruce also points out to the fact that Paul, in the course of time may have come to recognize that he might not survive to see the parousia of the Lord (2 Cor. 1:8f, 5:8, Philippians 1:21-24) (178).

The debate has, however, not been one sided, for many have come out to defend the sayings of Jesus Christ and Apostle Paul in the light of criticism and devaluation of their sayings. Patristic commentators struggled with the problem that Paul would have been proven to be wrong in I Thessalonian 4:15, if his words were taken literally. John Chrysostom held that Paul was not speaking of himself, but of those who would be alive at the parousia, Oecumenius explained that Paul was speaking of living souls; and Theophylact thought that Paul was not talking of himself but that by adding those who are alive, who are left, he signified by his own passion, all those who would live to the end (Howard 127). Giesen has pointed out that the term “we” has a variety of meanings. (quoted in Malherbe 25).

C. L. Mearns is of the view that the earliest eschatology of the church and of Paul was realized eschatology; future eschatology was developed because of the death of Christians and the need to correct enthusiasm (quoted in Witherington 157). However, Witherington opines that Paul’s eschatological language manifests a rich variety and complexity, and as time went on he put less stress on future eschatology than he did in some of his earlier letters, for reasons that are not completely clear. This did not, however, amount to abandoning one form of eschatology for another as Romans 13 and Philippians 1 and 3 make clear. He states that:

As Paul moved closer to his death and this was likely to come before the parousia, he quite naturally reflected more on life in heaven with the Lord. This increased focus on vertical eschatology is evident in those letters where his death may have seemed rather near (2 Corinthians and Philippians) (154).

Witherington argues further that Paul never really de-eschatologizes his thought. Infact, he does not even expunge the purely future elements of this Christology even in his latest letters. He posits that Paul's thought had a Christological framework from start to finish, unless the interplay of Paul's soteriology, Christology and theology is borne in mind, Paul's thinking will not be fully understand (155). He opines that:

The Christological framework is shaped especially by Paul's belief that Jesus is the crucified and risen Messiah who has already made salvation available to all, but has not yet completed the full work of salvation. This is why Paul can speak of salvation as both present and yet future. Paul speaks without precedent from his Jewish background of a return of a Messiah from heaven because of his Christology. Secondly, Paul bifurcates the resurrection into that of Christ and that of those who belong to him and he speaks of the final judgment sometimes as an act of God and sometimes as an act of Christ and speaks of the Yom Yahweh sometimes focusing on Christ's role and sometimes focusing on God's (Witherington 154).

These conflicting views denoting "the already and not yet tension in Paul's eschatology is caused by what he believed is already true about Jesus Christ and has been accomplished by law and by what he will yet to do at the parousia. For Witherington: Paul never totally resolves this tension either by stressing the already at the expense of the not-yet or vice versa, precisely because he always believed that he stands between the resurrection of Christ and his return.

The debate is heated up amongst Biblical Scholars. Some relativize the issue by holding that Paul always had both possibilities open to him (Best 196). They argue that if at most Jesus or Paul spoke of the possible imminence of the final intervention of God or his agent in human history, then it is not appropriate to speak of Paul or for that matter of Jesus attempting to cope with the problem of eschatological delay. Carrol aptly argues:

In order to have a delay there must be a specific time or schedule whereby an event, arrival or expectation can be known to be late. Without such information, it is not possible to use the term “delay” ... this factor suggests that ‘delay of parousia’ treatments of the New Testament may not be built in firm foundation (quoted in Witherington 48).

Witherington’s view is that neither Jesus nor Paul seem to have taught that the parousia of the Son of Man would definitely come within their lifetimes or within a generation. He proposes that they do seem to entertain the possibility that the end might come soon, hence the warning given to their respective audiences to be prepared, stay awake, keep watch. However, nothing in this data justifies the conclusion that the teaching of either Jesus or Paul amounted to little more than an interim ethic, or radical contingency plans since the end of the world would necessarily come soon (156).

5. ESCHATOLOGICAL DELAY IN JEWISH APOCALYPTIC

In order to appreciate the distinctively Christian features in their true significance in relation to the delay of the parousia, there is the need to relate the Christian understanding to its Jewish apocalyptic background. The problem of eschatological delay was familiar to Jewish apocalyptic from its beginnings. It is postulated to be one of the most important ingredients in the mixture of influences and circumstances which produced the apocalyptic movement (Bauckham 3). Bauckham asserts that “in the face of the delay in the fulfillment of the eschatological promises of the prophets, the apocalyptic visionaries were those who believed most fervently that the promises remained valid and relevant”. He observed that in almost all the apocalypses there is no mistaking both a consciousness, to some degree, of the problem of delay, in that the prophecies had so long remained unfulfilled, and also the conviction of their imminent fulfillment.

For it goes only a little beyond the evidence, that in every generation between the mid-second century BC and the mid-second century AD Jewish apocalyptists encouraged their readers to hope for the eschatological redemption in the very near future. With little or no evidence to suggest that during the period of waiting, the apocalyptic hope was discredited due to their continued disappointment nor did it diminish the sense of imminence in later generations.

In early Jewish and Christian eschatology, the theology of imminence or of a sudden end could be and was often juxtaposed with an accounting of some events usually involving a time of tribulation and distress that must transpire before the end. Sometimes the language of imminence is even accompanied by periodization or calculations (Whiteley 245). Bauckham states that:

The apocalypses of the past were preserved and treasured; and passages whose imminent expectation had not been fulfilled were nevertheless copied and by no means always updated. Each apocalyptist knew that his predecessors had held the time of the end to be at hand, but this knowledge seems to have encouraged rather than discouraged his own sense of eschatological imminence (4).

In the life of the Jews, the problem of delay was an inescapable problem at the heart of apocalyptic eschatology; but the tension it produced was not a destructive tension. This tension was somehow managed within itself. This delay did not lead to doubt, and discrediting of the prophets as being witnessed in our contemporary time. Bauckham identified theological factors as responsible for both the promotion of imminent expectation and accounting for the fact of delay and posits that these two contrary sets of factors were held in tension in Jewish apocalyptic. They were not harmonized to produce a kind of compromise: expectation of the end in the fairly near future but not just yet. The factors promoting imminence and the factors accounting for delay are held in paradoxical tension, with the result that the imminent expectation can be maintained in all its urgency inspite of the continuing delay.

Using the text of Habakkuk as its locus classicus: “The vision is yet for the appointed time, it hastens to the end and will be late”. Bauckham identifies the Omnipotent Sovereignty of God, who has determined the time of the end as the basic apocalyptic explanation of the delay. The apparent delay belongs to the purpose of God. According to God’s timescale, it will not be late. The effectiveness of this explanation derives its quality as an affirmation of faith in God which calls for appropriate response. With the Sovereignty of God fully established, the apocalyptic believer is admonished to wait patiently, persevering in obedience to God’s commandments in the time being. There was a balance between the believer’s impatient prayer that God should no longer delay and the attitude of patient waiting while, in his Sovereignty. These two attitudes remained in tension while the apocalyptists maintained both. An assurance that God would deliver at an appointed time and an exhortation to patience; with the assurance that the waiting would be for only a short time. The problem of delay had from beginning being incorporated into the problem of imminence. Secondly, the problem of delay in apocalyptic, as posited by Bauckham is no ordinary problem of unfulfilled prophecy, but is the apocalyptic version of the problem of evil. Bauckham states that:

The apocalypists were vitally concerned with the problems of theodicy, with the demonstration of God’s righteousness in the face of the unrighteousness of his world. They explored various possibilities as to the origins of evil and the apportioning of responsibility for evil, but of primary and indispensable significance for the apocalyptic approach to the problem of evil was the expectation of the End, when all wrongs would be righted, all evil eliminated, and God’s righteousness vindicated.

This has the merit of refusing to justify the present condition of the world by means of an abstract exoneration of God from responsibility for the evils of the present. Only the overcoming of present evil by eschatological righteousness could vindicate God as righteous, and only hope of such a future triumph of righteousness could make the evils of the present bearable. For what

is at stake in the sufferings of God's people is the righteousness of God, which, as often in the Old Testament, means at the same time justice for the oppressed and against the oppressor.

From the foregoing, the imminent expectation expresses the extremity of the situation, the intensity of the apocalyptists perception of the problem of evil, in its sheer contradiction of the righteousness of God. In this dilemma, the righteousness nor the Sovereignty of God was neither abandoned.

Their belief in the powers of evil was not dualistic: God remained in ultimate control. In the face of delay, the Jews continued to hold that God is righteous and that he remains sovereign. The delay belongs to his purpose and the End will come at the time he has appointed. This, therefore, is the tension of imminence and delay; the tension experienced by the theistic believer who, in a world of injustice, cannot give up his longing for righteousness. The apocalyptists rightly maintained the tension of imminence and delay; and from Bauckham's view, that tension must remain a feature of Christian theology (9).

6. EXEGETICAL CONSIDERATION OF SOME SELECTED TEXT IN PAULINE EPISTLES

The basic meaning of parousia ("coming") is presence, arrival, or coming. This is used in this way by Paul in I Cor. 16:17, 2 Cor. 7:6-7, 10:10, Phil. 1:26, 2:12. It is used by Paul in an eschatological sense primarily in his Thessalonian letters, of the coming of the Lord (I Thessalonians 2:19, 3:13, 4:15, 5:23, 2 Thessalonians 2:1; I Cor. 15:23) and of the Lawless One (2 Thess. 2:9), with a temporal sense, "at the parousia" until the parousia. (Malherbe 270). Paul uses other terms to describe the same event, for example, the verbal form *erchesthai* (to come), I Cor. 4:5, 11:26, 2 Thess. 1:10), the *apokalypsis* (revelation) of the Lord (I Cor. 1:7, 2 Thess 1:7, Rom. 2:5) "Day of the Lord" (I Cor 5:5, I Thess. 5:2, that day 2 Thess. 1:10, "the day": Rom.

13:12). These other terms describing the eschatological climax are derived from Jewish sources, but there is no unambiguous evidence that *parousia* was used in this technical sense in pre-Christian Judaism.

It is remarkable that the word in its technical sense is largely confined to I Thessalonians. It is supplanted in the Pastoral Epistles by *epiphaneia* (“appearance”), an even more religiously charged word (I Tim. 6:14, 2 Timothy 1:10, 4: 1, 8: Titus 2:13). The term “second coming” appears for the first time in the latter half of the second century, when it describes the second coming of Christ in contrast to his humble coming in the flesh (Malherbe 270). This essay will be limiting itself to two passages in the book of I Thessalonians depicting imminence, delay and uncertainty. These are passages used by liberal scholars to argue that Paul’s eschatological views changed.

I Thessalonian 4:15-17

Greek Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:15 Τοῦτο γὰρ ὑμῖν λέγομεν ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου, ὅτι ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι εἰς τὴν παρουσίαν τοῦ κυρίου οὐ μὴ φθάσωμεν τοὺς κοιμηθέντας·¹⁶ ὅτι αὐτὸς ὁ κύριος ἐν κελεύσματι, ἐν φωνῇ ἀρχαγγέλου καὶ ἐν σάλπιγγι θεοῦ, καταβήσεται ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ καὶ οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον,¹⁷ ἔπειτα ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι ἅμα σὺν αὐτοῖς ἀρπαγησόμεθα ἐν νεφέλαις εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου εἰς ἄερα· καὶ οὕτως πάντοτε σὺν κυρίῳ ἔσόμεθα.

English Translation: Verse 15: For this we tell you as a message from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall by no means have precedence over those who have fallen asleep.¹⁶ Because the Lord himself will descend from heaven, with a command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first,¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be snatched up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

This passage is embedded in I Thessalonian 4:13-18, which is an exhaustive, discussion of eschatology. Verse 13 begins with an epistolary cliché dealing with the recipients knowledge

about the subject introduced, uses the term adelphoi (brethren) in the vocative, and uses peri (“about”) to introduce a new subject (4:13). It also ends with a confident statement about the believers being with the Lord (4:17). The larger discussion is enclosed by elpis (“hope”, 4:13), which, with the themes of the eschatological community, provides the perspective from which the details between these two brackets are to be seen. Malherbe notes that “the structure of 4:13-18 is straightforward. He states that:

The subject of the pericope (Christians who have died) and Paul’s intention of writing (that his readers not grieve) are stated in verse 13. Paul seeks to accomplish his goal in two ways. First in verse 14, he adduces his and his reader’s belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus, from which he draws the inference that God through Jesus will gather all Christians who had died. He then strengthens this explanation that he calls a word of the Lord. He applies this message from the Lord to the immediate situation; a fear of some of his readers that those alive at the coming of the Lord will in some way have an advantage over those who will have died by then. (vv. 15-17). He concludes with an exhortation that they comfort each other (v 18) which thus forms an inclusion to the pericope that began with a concern for his readers’ grief (v 13) (261).

From Verse 15, Paul draws the attention of the Thessalonians that he has a message from the Lord to them. The Greek reads ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου (“by word of the Lord”). Paul does not quote the word of the Lord but applies it to the situation at hand. Three major possible meanings have been suggested for (“a word of the Lord”). The first is that Paul has in mind an actual statement made by Jesus, as he has in I Corinthians 7:10, 9:14, 11:23. The second is that Paul uses a tradition closely related to Matthew 24 and its parallels but supplements and interprets it in the light of Jewish apocalyptic speculation based on Daniel 7:13 and 12:2-3. The third possibility, which enjoys wide acceptance, is that the reference is to a prophetic word (Malherbe 267-68). Many scholars however, prefer to think that Paul took material from Jewish –Christian apocalypse and ascribed it to the exalted Lord. An analogy for this is found in Mark 13, where a Jewish apocalypse clearly climaxes through as the Kernel (13:7-8, 12, 14-22, 24-27) of the

apocalyptic speech.” (Luedemann, 231). The Logos Kyrion need not designate a single statement but could be used of a complex of doctrine or of parts of such a complex.

The γὰρ of v. 15 indicates that v. 14 is to be explained and confirmed by what follows (Frame 170). It signals that Paul will now provide information on how the eschatological association with Jesus will come about Τοῦτο (“this”) refer forward to the explanation regarding the relation of living and dead Christian to one another and the coming of Christ from heaven. ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι εἰς τὴν παρουσίαν τοῦ κυρίου (“We who are alive who are left until the coming of the Lord”). The pronoun ἡμεῖς (we) is in contrast to τοὺς κοιμηθέντας and is modified by ζῶντες (who are alive) and περιλειπόμενοι (who are left). The temporal limit is established by εἰς τὴν παρουσίαν (until the coming of the Lord”), but Paul’s focus is not confined to the parousia. The present participles describe those who are now living, who are left some of whom are grieving for the dead. Their existence is eschatological, bracketed by Jesus resurrection and his coming. The bone of contention in this text is the use of first person pronoun in this verse. By using the first person pronoun ἡμεῖς Paul includes himself with those who will still be living at the parousia, as he does in I Cor. 15:52 (France 47, 172, Malherbe 270). Elsewhere however he identifies himself with those who will be raised (I Cor. 6:14, 2 Cor. 4:14, 5:1, Phil. 1:20).

France buttresses the fact that Paul could have used the indefinite third person had he not wished to include himself among those who would probably survive to the parousia. This has led to the view that Paul’s eschatology evolved as he faced new circumstances (Dodd 108-11). Elliott does not want to attribute too much significance to “living and surviving”: For, at the time of writing these words, Paul was one of ζῶντες and περιλειπόμενοι, and such he distinguishes

himself and them from the κοιμηθέντας, and naturally identifies himself with the class to which he and they belonged.

I Thessalonian 5: 1-2

Greek: 1 Thessalonians 5:1 Περὶ δὲ τῶν χρόνων καὶ τῶν καιρῶν, ἀδελφοί, οὐ χρείαν ἔχετε ὑμῖν γράφεσθαι, ² αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἀκριβῶς οἶδατε ὅτι ἡμέρα κυρίου ὡς κλέπτῃς ἐν νυκτὶ οὕτως ἔρχεται.

English Translation: About the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to be written, for you yourselves know accurately that the Day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.

Paul begins this section of the letter with the phrase Περὶ δε (now concerning or about the). Which introduces a change of topic. But here the topic is closely related to what immediately precedes it. The change of subject is also signaled by the direct address of the readers as ἀδελφοί (brothers and sisters) (France 177). The change is not radical, for Paul is still speaking of living with a view towards the end, but he now takes up calculations of eschatological chronology and their effect on the Christian life (Malherbe 288). The phrase “the times and seasons” is the first of a number of phrases, words and images in verse 1-10 that do not appear elsewhere in Paul. The two terms taken slightly together, can have slightly different meanings: χρόνων (time), referring to time in its extension and καιρῶν καιρῶν (“season”) to a definite moment in time (Malherbe 288). Malherbe posits that both terms were used eschatologically and they in fact are a hendiadys, the two expressing the same idea.

In 5:1, times and seasons allude to the parousia as a time of judgement (Wanamaker 178). Wanamaker notes that the use of “the time(s)” as a cipher for the period (often the endtime) when divine intervention and judgement would occur can be found in Old Testament, particularly in Jeremiah and Daniel (Jer. 6:15, 10:15, 18:23, 50:31; Dn. 8:17, 11: 35, 12:1, 4, 9), in intertestamental Jewish writings and in the New Testament (Mark 13:33, Mt. 8:9, Lk. 21:8,

Acts. 3: 19-21, Rev. 1:3). Paul himself uses the word *καιρος* to refer to the judgement I Cor. 4:5. In addition the expression “the times and dates” is parallel to the expression ‘*ἡμέρα κυρίου*’ (“the day of the Lord”) in verse 2. This clearly alludes judgement.

In I Thessalonian 5:2, the emphasis is on “the day of the Lord” a threatening time of judgement. Paul uses “day of the Lord” to depict the parousia. The time of judgement is implied by the principal image Paul utilizes to describe it in verse 2. He says it (comes like a thief in the night). This metaphor is found in the Q parable of Matthew 24:43 and Luke 12:39, which compares the unexpected coming of the Son of Man to the unexpected coming of a thief in the night (Wanamaker 179, Malherbe 290).

Witherington asserts that “origin of the “thief in the night” motif goes back to Q saying found in Luke 12:39/Matthew 24:43. He alludes to the fact that “this metaphorical utterance, at an early date in the transmission of the tradition, seems to have been clearly understood to refer to the coming of the Son of Man at an unexpected hour (36).

The metaphorical utterance was then picked up and used in various ways in a wide variety of Christian community in the middle and later parts of the first century. Always the metaphor is taken to allude to the coming of the “Day of the Lord at an unexpected hour”. And because someone is coming at an hour unknown, it calls for watchfulness.

From the foregoing exegetical considerations, we can deduce the meaning of imminence. Jesus and Paul quite used the language of imminence in their discussion. However, this was not to establish any sort of eschatological time table, but rather to inculcate a sort of moral earnestness in believers so that their eyes will remain fixed upon the goal, eagerly longing for the fulfillment of God’s plan for human history. Paul, then used the term “We” in writing to the Thessalonians, not with the language of certainty but with uncertainty as revealed in I

Thessalonian 5:1-2. The imagery of a thief in the night portrays uncertainty. If he had used the indefinite third person plural to instruct the Thessalonians, then it would have revealed a language of certainty, that he was sure when Christ would return, and that would be after his death. But rather he used the first person plural construction, to include himself, in case the parousia took place in his own time.

No proof whatsoever has been provided that Jesus flatly affirmed in error that the eschatological kingdom would shortly come. He taught that a great manifestation of God's kingdom would be seen by some of his disciples and that the signs that point to the arrival of the kingdom would be seen by his own generation. He testified in Mark 1:15 that "the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come". The manifestation of this kingdom was seen by some who heard him, as his own generation.

Other sayings point to a delay of the parousia or the manifestation of the kingdom to an indeterminate future. However, the predominating emphasis is upon the uncertainty of the time, in the light of which men must always be ready. This is the characteristic of the Old Testament prophets as witnessed in Jewish apocalyptic. The day of the Lord is near (Isa. 56:1, Zeph. 1:14, Joel 3:14). Yet the prophets have a future perspective. They are able to hold the present and the future is an unresolved tension. This tension between imminence and delay in the expectation of the end is characteristic of the entire Biblical eschatology.

7. AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES: ESCHATOLOGY

Linear Time and Anthropological Anxiety

This section attempts to reconcile the tension between imminence and delay of the parousia from an African perspective. This is from the perspective of similarities between the religious and social life of the ancient Jews and Africans. Mbiti states that the religious and

social life of the ancient Jews is similar to that of many African societies (336). Felder posits that Israel is physically within the African influence, and the culture of the ancient Hebrews was similar to that of African peoples.

Africans find discussions relating to eschatology either uninformative or uninteresting. These discussions mainly focus on “last things” without sufficiently exploring how belief about these future events informs, challenges or reshapes the way we live our lives now. (Dyrness 282). Even when an attempt is made to show how eschatology relates to other areas of life; it always tends to be futuristic. Dyrness attributes this problem with the predominantly Western outlook that has shaped discussions about eschatology. He is of the opinion that eschatology is not a “belief” or set of beliefs about the future. It is a posture with which we live our lives now. Eschatology shapes distinctive practices of life in the present (283).

Dyrness identifies two closely related concepts which help to explain this “futuristic” outlook of eschatology. The first is the Western Lineal Conception of time according to which time moves from the past to the present, and into an ever-expanding future. The next is anthropological anxiety about personal survival and the fear of death associated with it. The combination of these two concepts have meant that eschatological discussions are not only futuristic, but are either simply a form of consolation (and thus focus on such topics as reward, heaven, immortality, etc) or a veiled warning about the end (and thus focus on such topics as judgment, punishment, hell, eternal damnation). He notes that:

At any rate, once these realities of the end are projected as beliefs about the “future”, they do not exercise a decisive influence on how we live our lives now, except perhaps as an occasional reminder of what will happen to us “on the last day”. What this actually means is that the present – the time that we live in now – is emptied of ultimate significance and becomes “mere time” – empty mechanical or clock time which must be filled in with “more determinate” activities like economics and politics (283).

Thus, Dyrness, states that “the projection of eschatology into the distant future desacralizes not just temporal time, but also the activities of politics and economics in such a way that the doctrine of eschatology has no purchase on the way we conduct those activities.

The African Notion of Time

To help recover this sense of Christian eschatology as a determinate posture in the present, an African perspective of time might help. John Mbiti notes that “the characteristically western notion of time with its threefold linear dimension has so deeply and subconsciously governed our understanding of New Testament eschatology that we have a distorted or exaggerated picture of the whole subject (Testament 38). Felder, also opines that “Christianity represents the Europeanization of the basically African notions in the Old Testament” (2). Emphasis on the future is added to it and the Bible is read from an European viewpoint.

Mbiti not only helps to capture the difference between Western and African accounts of eschatology; he also shows how some aspects of the African conception are closer to the biblical version of eschatology than those accounts sponsored by a western-missionary lens. Mbiti provides a way out by proposing that the solution lies with the view of time and history operative in the African setting and the European Setting. Based on his native, Kamba Society, Mbiti posits that in Africa, unlike the Western view, time is considered a two dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a dynamic present (Mbiti 24), and a very limited or non-existent future. In furtherance, among Africans, time is not ‘mechanical’. It is, rather, a succession of events that move not into the future, but “backward”, so to speak, into the past, which is the centre of gravity. For Africans, Mbiti states that:

History therefore does not move toward a goal in the future, but instead points to the past, wherein lies the root of existence: the origin of the world, the creation of humans, the formation of customs and traditions, and the coming into being of the structure of the world (25).

Mbiti in furtherance says that the Linear Concept of time found in Western thought with a long past, present and indefinite future are foreign to the African conceptual scheme. He draws out two African languages – Kikamba and Gikuyu – to buttress his position. These two languages have tense verbs rather than tenseless verbs to characterize time. From this he concludes that time is a two dimensional phenomenon: a long past or Zamani, a present or Sasa, and no future. Sasa has the sense of immediacy and now-ness, it is microtime (Irele and Jeyifo 379). Zamani according to Mbiti, cannot be limited to what the English call the past because it also has its own past, present, and future but on a larger scale. It is macrotime. The Zamani is not separable from Sasa because they overlap. The Sasa feeds and disappears into Zamani. The period of nowness includes perhaps a few days past and a few days ahead depending on whether these periods are considered as part of our immediate lives. For Africans, therefore, time is simply a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place and those which are immediately to occur.

Objections have been raised against Mbiti's position. Most critics have objected to his generalization of this concept (future) from two East African languages to cover all other African languages because this is not applicable to other African conceptions of time (Irele and Jeyifo 379). These critics have pointed out that in most African languages, there are tenseless verbs that convey that Africans have concepts of the future. Gyekye has argued that in Akan conceptual scheme, time is a concrete reality (170). He posits that time has its metaphysical existence, and "it is not events that compose time; it is not events that generate the awareness of the existence of time (170-171). Wiredu opposes Gyekye, by saying "that if the concept of existence in the Akan language is examined, it would be seen to chime or agree, contra Gyekye, with the spatial or

locative conception of time”. To exist, in the Akan language, is to *Wo ho*, which means to be at some place (Gyekye). If this is the case, it would be highly contradictory to view time as existing because it has to be spatial or locative, and this is not compatible with the absolutist conception of time, which Gyekye ascribes to the Akans.

This disparity results in difficulty associated with the generalization of concepts. To generalize a particular concept for Africans possess real difficulties. For example, the Yorubas have a three dimensional concept of time. *Ojoiwaju* –future, *Nisin* – present, and time for the past. But in the Ijawland, Mbiti’s position could be said to be true. There is no word for the future in Ogbia language. The closest is *Elegain*- which is tomorrow. The next is *A-di-ya* – which is ahead. *Elegain* bears the notion of days ahead tomorrow, next and maybe a year ahead. *Adiya* is what is in your front. It is not used for true alone. The culture of the Ijaw man tells you that the concept of the future has not been part of them. Predominantly, fishermen and farmers. When they kill fish, it is all consumed within a day or two. Believing in God to provide for the next day. When they earn money, they believe in spending all today for the future is unknown, so they do not think of it.

It will be difficult to claim that all Africans, even all members of a particular culture share the same belief. This paper agrees with Pauline J. Hountondji who wrote that:

What we must understand is that never in any society does everyone agree with everyone else. One of the most perverse myths invented by ethnology, whose effects in return contribute to the survival of ethnology itself, is the myth of primitive unanimity, the myth that non-western societies are ‘simple’ and homogenous at every level, including the level of ideology and belief. What we must recognize today is that pluralism does not come to any society from outside but is inherent in every society.

There are, however, some generalizations that can be made. People in one part of the world may share a basic ontology, which may differ from the ontology held by most people in

another part of the world. In our modern world, we can categorize everything as alive or not alive, or as animal, vegetable or mineral. In African societies, people have other ways of categorizing, like the northerners categorizing every area in the East and Southern part of Nigeria to be Igbo; and people categorizing every area in the North to be Hausa. Such generalizations must abound. It is on this basis that the writer aligns himself with the views of Mbiti in respect of the African concept of time.

Bruce Malina presented a model of how first-century Mediterranean peoples understood time. He notes that “Basically ancient people concern themselves with what happens “today”, they appropriately pray for today’s bread (Matt. 6:11) or find today’s evil sufficient (Matt. 6:34). The future belongs to God alone and it is shameful to delve into it or speculate about it (237). This view is similar to the African concept of time.

Implications of African Concept of Time

Dyrness and Karkkainen drew implications from Mbiti’s observation concerning the African concept of time; which help in confirming that eschatology is indeed about distinct social patterns, habits and practices with which Christians must live in the present (283-84). These are:

- (i) A Dynamic Present: Given the two – dimensional account of time in Africa, it is the past rather than any distant future by which people orient their living and thinking. Our understanding of the world is orientated toward this finality, not as a period of inactivity or extinction – not even as a when, but as a where. Our past is the explanation where explanations of the present are sought (Mbiti 28).
- (ii) A Sacred Universe: With an African perspective, the centre of gravity is the past from which explanations of the present are sought, African societies have myths and stories

that relate to this “long long time ago”. It invokes myths, stories and explanations that are corrected to the spiritual realm and point back to a time before time. Invoking an African perspective leads to a renewed appreciation of scripture which transports Christians back to the mythical “in the beginning”.

(iii) The Posture of Memory: These myths and stories within African societies encourage and form the virtue of memory, not simply as a mental habit, but as a posture of living with constant awareness and reference to the finality that is not simply a *when*, but is *where* our account of human existence lies. Within the African perspectives, Jesus’ invitation to ‘do this is memory of me’ becomes perpetually present and urgent. Eschatology is what helps to make the memory of Jesus real.

(iv) A Deep Sense of Hope: The two dimensional concept of time in Africa means that history does not head toward a futuristic goal, a climax or termination. People have nothing to fear and nothing to set their world upon as far as the distant future is concerned. This has a deep affinity for the Christian view of life. The moment of history for Christians lies in the past. Christian history is therefore a gradual process that draws us all back into what has already been realized in the death and resurrection of Christ. This gives Christians the ability to face the future with confidence, not as an “end” that is tenacious and therefore uncertain, but as an end that has already happened.

Felder notes “that the Western view of time is linear with an emphasis on what point on a time line live an event occurs; whether past, present or future” (3) The line extends infinitely before us for we can always add a year or another. Unfortunately our lives do not extend infinitely before us. We can think of a future that we cannot be part of.

Problems Associated with the Western Concept of Time

Felder highlights the following as problems associated with the Western view of time:

- (i) A linear view of time assumes a time line with a beginning and accounting for the end. Thus Christianity is concerned with explaining the origin of the world, and the last judgement.
- (ii) The future stretches infinitely before us; but whereas the time line is infinite our lives are finite. Thus death makes no sense on the European view and Christianity is concerned with promising the much needed after life.

In philosophy of mind, the language of thought hypothesis (LOTH) put forward by American philosopher Jerry Fodor, describes thoughts as represented in a “language” (sometimes known as mentalese) that allows complex thoughts to be built up by combining simpler thoughts. The principle of linguistic relativity also holds that the structure of a language affects the ways in which its speaker are able to conceptualize their world. There is therefore a relationship between language and thought. This idea goes back to the classical civilizations ([Www.Ttt.Org/Highlinks/Stacy](http://www.Ttt.Org/Highlinks/Stacy) Philipps. htm).

Bruce Mahna asserts that basically ancient people of the first-century Mediterranean would concern themselves with what happens “today”, From Mbiti John hypothesis, African concept of time is derived, which is a two-dimensional concept. Felder and Mbiti attest to the fact that the ancient Jews were more “African” than “Asian” in many respects, and were it not for the suez canal they might be less associated with Asia and more with Africa (Mbiti Religion 336). Felder notes that “Israel is physically within Africa influence, and the culture of the ancient Hebrews was similar to that of African peoples.

From these postulations, inferences can be made that Paul and the writers of the New Testament were more inclined to an African thought form than the Westernized thought pattern.

They had a two-dimensional concept of time. This may account for the use of the language of imminence by Paul in his earlier writings; the future was not part of his thinking. He believed in the imminent return of Christ, which falls within the domain of the present or Sasa. For Sasa has the sense of immediacy and now-ness and it is microtime. (Mbiti Testament 48). In I Thessalonians 4:15-17. The “We” is a language of immediacy or now-ness. It could be attributed to his thought form. Dyrness discussions on the implication of the two-dimensional concept of time on Eschatology (parousia is an essential part of Eschatology) reveals that there is a dynamic present; a sacred Universe, and a deep source of hope. There in lies the basis for the use of the language of imminence. It was not a language of certainty, but one of hope. I Thessalonians 5:1-2, reveals that Paul was not certain of the day of the parousia. The futuristic perspective comes along certainty. When an event is viewed with the futuristic concept, it makes for complacency, it does not call for watchfulness, and preparedness. Imminence calls for alertness, watchfulness and makes one prepared. It is an apocalyptic language that calls for alertness.

The futuristic language takes away the fear of the imminent occurrence of an event; so the need for one to be alert and watchful will no longer be there. Since the parousia is viewed both as a glorious event for those who are righteous and a day of judgement for oppressors and the wicked. The most appropriate language for its expression is the language of Imminence and Uncertainty. Whatever is said with certainty takes away its unexpected occurrence. The “delay” to the African who does not have a three-dimensional or linear concept of time, but has the consciousness of living his life within the limits of an imminent occurrence of “the day of the Lord” is uncalled for. The African has hope, faith in the ability of the Almighty God to intervene in his situation. The language of a “future occurrence” takes away that “hope” and faith in God.

SUMMARY

This work is an attempt to reconcile the tension between imminence and delay of the parousia, from an African perspective. Parousia, etymologically means “presence” arrival”; In its technical and theological usage, it is a term used to describe the “second coming of Christ”. It plays a significant role in the eschatological discourse of Christianity and specifically in the New Testament. All books of the New Testament address this significant concept.

There has been an on-going tension or debate with regards to the non-fulfillment or the delay of the parousia between conservative and liberal scholars. The liberal scholars, led by A. Schweitzer who coined the phrase “the delay of the parousia”, argue that Jesus made a mistake in Mark 9:1 and parallels, Mark 13:30-33 and parallels in his judgement of the occurrence of the parousia. They posit that Jesus had an imminent idea of the fulfillment of the parousia; and believed it would occur within his generation with some of his disciples witnessing it.

They are of the opinion that other sayings of the delay of the parousia that appear in the synoptics were put in the mouth of Jesus by the early church after the non-fulfillment of the parousia. For, Paul the liberal scholars argue, that his eschatology changed from a predominantly horizontal to a predominant vertical Eschatology. It is argued that Paul believed that he will witness the parousia, based on the use of the emphatic first person pronoun (I Thessalonians 4:15-17) in describing those who will witness the parousia. By this, Paul includes himself. When Paul realized that he would not witness the parousia, his theology of an eschatology changed to a vertical eschatology in his subsequent letters. This is the foundation of the tension between imminence and delay of the parousia, in New Testament Theology.

To reconcile this tension, its roots from Jewish apocalyptic was traced, this is to help in appreciating the distinctive Christian features in it. The problem of eschatological delay was found to be familiar to Jewish apocalyptic from its beginnings and could be said to be one of the

most important ingredients in the mixture of influences and circumstances which produced the apocalyptic movement. In the face of such delay in the fulfillment of the eschatological promises of the prophets, the apocalyptic visionaries were those who believed most fervently that the promises remained valid and relevant. In almost all the apocalypses there is no mistaking that both a consciousness, to some degree, of the problem of delay, in that the prophecies had so long remained unfulfilled, and about the conviction of their imminent fulfillment. The problem of delay was an inescapable problem at the heart of apocalyptic eschatology; but the tension it produced was not a destructive tension. This was a tension which the apocalyptic faith embraced within itself. Two sets of factors were identified for the management of this tension. Both were theological factors and were harmonized to produce a kind of compromise in expectation of the End in the fairly near future but not just yet. The basic apocalyptic explanation of the delay is subsumed in a belief in the omnipotent sovereignty of God, who has determined the time of the End. Secondly, acknowledging the sovereignty of God and the truth of his promises, the apocalyptic believer is called therefore to wait patiently, persevering in obedience to God's commandments in the meantime. The believer's impatient prayer was balanced by the attitude of patient waiting while in his Sovereignty, God did delay. These two attitudes remained in tension; but the apocalypticist maintained both. This was how the tension between imminence and delay was maintained and contained within the apocalyptic faith.

These same attitudes continued in the early era of Christianity in early Jewish and Christian eschatology, the theology of imminence or of a sudden end could be and was often juxtaposed with accounting of some events usually involving a time of tribulation and distress that must transpire before the end. The sayings of Christ in Mark 9:1 (and parallels) and Mark 13:30, 33 (and parallels) were analyzed exegetically. Works of renowned scholars were looked

into and conclusions deduced from them. Some believe that these passages were not really talking about the parousia, they were actually making reference to the destruction of the temple and the manifestation of his kingdom to some who were with him. Others believe that there is no proof that Jesus was actually talking about his parousia. As such there is no proof that Jesus affirmed in error that his parousia would shortly come. Hence, the postulation of a “delay of the parousia” is in error. In order to have a delay there must be a specific time or schedule whereby an event, arrival or expectation can be known to be late. Without such information it is not possible to use the term delay. This, therefore, suggests that “delay of the *parousia*” treatments of the New Testament may not be but on firm foundations.

It is affirmed that Paul used the emphatic first person pronoun, which implies that he included himself to be amongst those who will witness the parousia. Paul was speaking with uncertainty, not a language of certainty. For Paul never really de-eschatologized his thoughts. His thought had an eschatological framework from start to finish, but unless the interplay of Paul’s soteriology, Christology and theology with that of the eschatological framework is borne in mind, his thinking will not be fully understood.

The already/not-yet tension in Paul’s eschatology is caused by what he believes is already true about Jesus Christ and has been accomplished by him and by what he will yet do at the parousia. Paul never totally resolves this tension either by stressing the already at the expense of the not yet or vice versa; precisely because he always believed that he stands between the resurrection of Christ and his return.

From the African perspective, the attempt to reconcile the tension between imminence and delay of the parousia was made through an understanding of the concept of time from the African background. Felder believes that Christianity represents the Europeanization of basically

African notions of the Old Testament. From Bruce Malina's understanding of the concept of time from the first century – Mediterranean people and John Mbiti's concept of African time, it was deduced that Paul's thought and the writers of the New Testament may have had a two-dimensional concept of time. Not the three-dimensional linear concept of time of the western world, which projects time from the past, the present and into the future. The African concept of time is limited to only the past and the present. With this mentality, most events were conceived with a sense of imminence. Sasa has the sense of immediacy and now-ness, and it is microtime. There is an intertwined relationship between thought pattern and language. From the African thought, pattern, an explanation can be deduced for the use of "We" by Paul in his first Thessalonian writings.

8. CONCLUSION

This essay has successfully made an attempt to reconcile the tension between the imminence of the parousia and its delay. This attempt was made from the Jewish perspective, distinctive Christian perspective and an African perspective. From all of these, it was discovered that it is improbable that Jesus ever taught or suggested that his return would definitely and necessarily happen soon. Rather Jesus, like Paul, may have considered these events as possibly imminent, but the timing was uncertain since it was unknown. The fact remains that both Paul and Jesus, like some of their Jewish and Christian contemporaries who wrote in eschatological matters, were capable of combining the language of possible imminence with a discussion of events that must transpire before the end may come. If at most Jesus or Paul spoke of imminence of the final intervention of God or his agent in human history, then it is not appropriate to speak of Paul or for that matter of Jesus as attempting to cope with the problem of the delay of the parousia.

The primary function of the language of imminence is not to establish any sort of eschatological time table, but rather to inculcate a sort of moral earnestness in believers so that their eyes will be fixed upon the goal, eargerly longing for the fulfillment of God's plan for human history. The significance of the New Testament concept is that the tension between the non-fulfillment and fulfillment; between this world and the world to come, between hope and possession, between concealment and manifestations; between faith and sight should be resolved, and that the decisive contribution toward this has already been made in Christ.

In Africa lies certain concepts which contain certain truths that can be revealed. This paper has revealed one of such, which is the concept of time. Over-westernization of Christianity without taking into consideration, the context of the text may lead to some heretic teachings. A proper historical methodology which tries to understand the ancient thought patterns in terms of themselves, is a key to reconciling theological issues in the New Testament. Imposing the thought pattern of the modern scientifically trained, mind and a severe analytical criticism may serve only to destroy the Christian heritage and belief. Through this paper, it is believed whatever tension created by these texts which appear conflicting will be doused and relations between liberal and conservative scholars will become emollient.

In conclusion, the overall impression and intention of Paul and Jesus is clear, they leave the reader in a situation where he cannot date the time of the end, he cannot say that it will surely come today or next tomorrow, neither can he say it will come after a long time. The key note is watchfulness. Watch therefore, for you neither know the day nor the hour.

RECOMMENDATION

There is the need to take into consideration the historical-cultural context of a text before conclusions are drawn on certain issues. One of such is what this paper has treated. This has the

potential of destroying the faith of the believer; but with such an approach, whatever doubts will become erased. The tools of Biblical hermeneutics should not just end at the training institutions, but should be taught in the churches. This will help to give a proper understanding of scripture. In our African values lies certain keys to unravel difficult truths arising from the scriptures. These need to be studied and analyzed in *peripasu* with the Jewish culture to have a better understanding. Our understanding of the eschatological truths need to be reinforced in our churches, to prevent the infiltration of heretic teachings. It is believed this will help to build our faith in the Lord. The second coming of Christ is one of the strong pillars of the Christian faith. The significance of the language of imminence needs to be reechoed in our churches.

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